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ABSTRACT

This miniprint summarizes a study of the status of the teaching of peace themes in the Denver (Colorado) Public Schools. The intent was to analyze and provide recommendations for the development of peace education. The research methods included observations, interviews, and examination of curricular materials. Social studies departments in the schools were contacted to find the teachers who teach about peace. Twenty 7th grade classes were observed. Interviews were conducted with 20 teachers, 15 students, and 10 peace specialists. The intent was to study peace themes by examining how teachers and textbooks present issues and how students react, and by examining these data in the context of the views of peace education specialists. (RJC)

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# PEACE EDUCATION IN THE DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

## A Study of Social Studies Classes in Grade 7

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# PEACE EDUCATION IN THE DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

## A Study of Social Studies Classes in Grade 7

Mary Lou Salazar

This miniprint summarizes a study of the status of the teaching of peace themes in the Denver Public Schools. The intent was to analyze and provide recommendations for the development of peace education. The research methods included observations, interviews, and examination of curricular materials. Social studies departments in the schools were contacted to find the teachers who teach about peace. Twenty 7th grade classes were observed. Interviews were conducted with 20 teachers, 15 students and 10 peace specialists. The intent was to study peace themes by examining how teachers and textbooks present issues and how students react, and by examining these data in the context of the views of peace-education specialists. – More detailed information is available in the author's Ph.D. thesis, "A Study of Peace Education in the Denver Public Schools" (University of Colorado, 1994.)

## INTRODUCTION

The objective of this study is to determine the status of the teaching of peace themes in the Denver Public Schools. The intent was to analyze and provide recommendations for the development of peace education. The research methods included observations, interviews, and examination of curricular materials. Interviews were conducted with 15 students who studied under the teachers I interviewed from 7th grade social studies classes (8th graders were included when 7th and 8th graders were grouped together), 20 teachers, and 10 peace specialists. Part of the study was to investigate what peace themes are taught in Denver Public Schools by contacting all middle schools' social-studies departments to find the teachers who teach about peace. After the teachers were identified, meetings were scheduled with the teachers to find when peace themes were to be taught. Twenty 7th-grade classes were observed. Data were also collected from material such as curriculum units, textbooks, films, curriculum guides, quizzes, tests, and teachers' lesson plans. The intent was to study peace themes by examining how teachers and textbooks present issues and how students react, and by examining these data in the context of the views of peace-education specialists.

## CONCEPTIONAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed study is framed by the following values and assumptions.

- Violence and war are not conducive to the well-being of humanity.
- Violence and war are not the result of inevitable aspects of human nature.
- Peace can be taught, learned, and practiced as an alternative way of being, behaving, and living.
- The political socialization taught in most schools teaches limited beliefs pertaining to peace.
- In schools, peace is not a high-priority subject, because even if it is mentioned, only lip service is given to it as a subject matter.
- Teachers interested in teaching peace are often viewed with suspicion.
- Peace education is often viewed as unpatriotic.

- War and conquest fit nicely with the values of competition and individualism which support and foster systems that create or contribute to divisions of class, race, and gender.
- A hidden agenda appears to glorify war, and peace is put in an obscure place in the curriculum material.
- Peace is a life force, and war is a death force.
- Critical thinking is too often an unspoken "no-no" in public schools.
- Peace is healthy for children and other living things.
- If well informed about peace issues, teachers will be more likely to teach about peace.

## PURPOSE AND PROBLEMS

The *purpose* of this study is to assess the peace themes in the Denver Public Schools' curricula and to look at some viable alternatives for teaching peace education. A peace theme is any extended treatment of subject matter pertaining to the issue of peace. For the purpose of this study, peace means a world without war, a world that promotes altruism, justice, and harmony. Some examples of the use of peace themes are units that teach peace directly, such as units on interpersonal communication; conflict resolution between individuals and groups or within states or regions; international conflict resolutions; studies of the United Nations; and philosophies of different religions that teach peace and brotherhood.

The major *questions* to be addressed are:

(1) How are peace themes currently dealt with in the Denver Public Schools?
(2) What alternatives are being tried in other cities, states, and countries?
(3) How do these compare to those in the Denver Public Schools?
(4) How do the answers to these questions compare to the views of peace-education specialists?
(5) What changes in the public school curricula would best promote attitudes of peace?

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

### Setting

The site for the research was 7th-grade social studies classes (8th graders were included when 7th and 8th graders were grouped together) in the Denver Public Schools. A few of the classes were in subjects other than social studies because teachers in social studies recommended other teachers in other subjects who were teaching peace themes. Twenty classes were observed. The numbers of subjects selected for interviews were 15 students, 20 teachers and 10 specialists in the field of peace. Part of the study was to investigate where peace themes are taught in Denver Public Schools by contacting all the middle schools' social studies departments to find the teachers that teach peace themes. The teachers that teach peace were called, and meetings were set up with them to find out when peace themes were taught in order to schedule classroom observation.

### Documents

Documents examined for the study are subject-matter material pertaining to peace. The material was selected by teachers' recommendations of peace themes in text-books and curriculum guides, as well as teachers' lessons plans, quizzes, tests, videos and films.

A log book was maintained throughout the study which I used to observe classes and to record instructions, discussions, and topics I considered to be of major importance, such as reactions from students and interactions between teachers and students as well as among students. In recording conversations, verbal and non-verbal reactions, and descriptions of activities, I recorded as close to verbatim as I could. After some of the classes were over, I spent time sampling documents, and observing projects, adding additional insights to my notes.

### Interviews

The interviews were semi-structured. The instrument consisted of a standard set of questions, formulated in an open-ended fashion, with three specific sets of questions: for teachers; for students; and for peace specialists.

**Teachers**

Part of the study was to investigate where peace themes are taught in the Denver Public Schools. I contacted the social studies departments in all 18 middle schools (that include a total of 160 social studies teachers) until 20 teachers were found who teach peace. I then called the teachers, who were only in a few schools and explained my study and invited them to participate in the study by being interviewed and allowing me to observe their class. All twenty teachers agreed to the interviews and classroom observation. Some of them volunteered names of teachers in other subjects who also teach about peace. Interviews with teachers ranged from 40 minutes to one hour. They took place in classrooms and my home.

The gender and age of teachers were as follows: 15 females and 5 males; ages ranged from 24 to about 53.

**Students**

Asking for volunteers and accepting names of students suggested by teachers comprised the strategy I used to select students for interviews. At the end of each class I observed, I asked for student volunteers as well as telephone numbers of those who were interested in having interviews with me. Several times the teacher suggested names of students they felt would want to participate.

I then called the students and explained in detail what my study was about and exactly what the interview would entail. I asked them to discuss it with their parents to get their consent, or if parents had any questions or wanted more information, I spoke with them. I gave oral assurance to all interview respondents (exept the peace-education specialists) that their anonymity was to be protected, and the names of schools were also kept anonymous. I called the respondents a second time to set up the interview. Interviews took place in rooms assigned by the school personnel. The interviews varied from 30 minutes to an hour.

These students were studying under the teachers I interviewed. The gender and age of students were as follows: 8 females and 7 males; ages ranged from 12 to 14.

**Peace Specialists**

Peace specialists were selected for interviews based on information and recommendations gathered from people with specialities in peace studies and peace education. The following peace specialists were contacted and interviewed: Robert Muller, Chancellor of the University for Peace in Costa Rica and former United Nations Assistant Secretary General, who founded the Robert Muller School for Peace in Arlington, Texas; Elise Boulding, Former Secretary General of the International Peace Research Association and Professor of Sociology Emerita, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire; Paul Weher, Social Conflict Concentration, University of Colorado at Boulder; Barbara Wien, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia; Liz Loescher, Conflict Center, Denver, Colorado; Martha M. Urioste, Mitchell Elementary School (Montessori), Denver, Colorado; Mary Luke Tobin (Sister of Loretto), Coordinator of the Thomas Merton Center for Creative Exchange, Denver, Colorado; Arnold Langberg, Independent Redirection, Denver, Colorado; Åke Bjerstedt, Department of Educational and Psychological Research, Lund University, Malmö, Sweden; Colman McCarthy, Director of the Center for Teaching Peace and Syndicated Columnist for the Washington Post, Washington, D.C.

The gender and approximate ages of peace specialists were as follows: 5 females and 5 males; ages ranged from about 50 to about 80.

**Classroom Observation**

The classes selected for observation were those of teachers who were found to teach peace themes. What I was looking for in each class specifically was concepts of peace, such as the following: issues of nuclear war and information about defense systems; understanding of war behavior; multi- and inter-cultural education as it relates to peace; the teaching of peace as a process; a concept of peace accompanied by social justice and social action; global responsibility and interconnection; alternatives to violence like conflict resolution; nonviolence and the contribution of peacemakers.

Twenty 7th-grade classes were observed. In some classes 8th graders were included. Fifteen regular social studies classes were observed, and five classes were in subjects other than social studies.

The following are some of the questions.

1. In the course of observations of 20 classes, how many times were peace themes addressed?
2. What specific theme did students appear to be most interested in, and how and in what order were these themes addressed?
3. How were peace values presented, what were they, and how were they explained?
4. What are some of the methods and techniques used while teachers were presenting peace themes?

## CONCLUSIONS

There is no mandated peace-education curriculum systemically in place in the Denver Public Schools. The teaching of peace education is very limited, in part because it is not mandated.

I did find at least twenty individual teachers, 25% of the eighty contacted, who were teaching peace themes. And after classroom observations, I found that they were doing a good job of it; although well-developed resource units and related material were not found, in most classes peace themes were very well presented.

This study clearly shows that war and violence are clearly defined in textbooks both in the hidden and overt curriculum. Also war and violence frequently dominated students' (especially boys') conversation during classroom observations, and twelve of the twenty teachers said that boys love the subject of war. One teacher even showed how boys' grades improve during the unit on the Civil War. The conclusions from the study clearly demonstrate that war and violence far outweigh the teaching of peace in the curriculum, in textbooks, and in classroom discussions. Furthermore some important facts and connecting links, such as the relationship between economic factors and social injustices, on the one hand, and peace, on the other, are omitted in textbooks and in some classroom discussions. Nor are the root causes of violence and war explained or connected with peace. Four major data sources were employed in this study. The following discussion identifies some important differences among the four data sources.

The majority of the teachers interviewed did not feel that there was a need to teach concepts in their relationship to peace, such as culture and non-violence or to teach about the root causes of war. The majority of the peace specialists, on the other hand, reported that these areas are vital to the teaching and understanding of peace.

The majority of the teachers interviewed did not seem to think that the United Nations was an important topic. Yet several specialists claimed that the U.N. is very important in the teaching of peace. A large percentage of the teachers do not teach about contradictions in concepts pertaining to peace, while several peace specialists suggested incorporating controversial issues, or contradictory terms and positions, in order to encourage critical thinking on issues related to war and peace.

**Major Conclusions From Twenty Teachers**

The major conclusions from the twenty teachers' interviews were: The majority of the teachers reported that concepts related to peace, such as social justice, culture, or nonviolence, are generally not taught in relationship to peace; the majority do not teach about the root causes of violence and war; nor do they teach about the work of the United Nations; the majority of the teachers are not teaching about nuclear issues; and the teachers do not teach about contradictions in concepts pertaining to peace, although some teachers do teach about other contradictions. A good balance was found in the teaching of cooperation and competition, and the majority of the teachers teach cooperative activities; the majority of the teachers teach lessons in peace in hopes of developing critical and creative thinking, which most agreed is essential in the teaching and understanding of peace; and the majority of the teachers suggested that students learn about peace, war, and violence from informal education outside the schools, particularly from the home and family, peers, and the media. This theme that emerged may well explain in part why there is a rise in violence.

**Major Conclusions From Fifteen Students**

The major conclusions from fifteen students' interviews were: The majority of the students were exposed to peacemakers, but only 20%

reported that peacemakers were brought into their class; the civil rights period was the topic most frequently discussed by students; peace treaties were rarely discussed or taught to the students; some form of cooperative learning is being taught to the majority of the students. The majority of students reported that they were not taught about different concepts in relationship to peace and that the work of the United Nations is not being taught to the majority of students; and the majority said they had not learned about enemy images. Most students reported being taught about the early religions, but fundamental beliefs on peace and brotherhood were not taught in class; more than half of the students were taught about civil disobedience; half of the students said they had had some discussions on peace demonstrations; some values of peace were taught; only three students said they had learned about peace alternatives in history; a little over half of the students said they felt they were taught critical thinking; the majority of the students said they had not read stories about people who seek peace and justice; individual responsibility was taught.

**Major Conclusions From Twenty Classroom Observations**

Peace themes were found being taught in the twenty 7th-grade social-studies classes studied. The major topics presented in classes, according to the frequency with which they were addressed, were: war, violence, cooperative activities, civil disobedience, mediation, world view global, conflict resolution, values of peace, civil rights/social action, peace demonstrations, non-violence, enemy images, multi-cultural themes, nuclear war, and United Nations. A few times, war and violence were discussed together; the major theme that dominated the students' (particularly boys') conversation was war and violence; from my evaluation, and interviews with the specialists the subject of peace could well increase critical thinking skills; no biases or prejudices were found in any of the presentations which could impede critical thinking; peace, although it was not explained as a concept, was demonstrated in different ways; some central values of peace were discussed in some of the classes; and the topics of women, minorities, and the poor were excluded from the discussion in class. The teaching and learning methods that were found were games, role playing, research papers and presentations of them,

lectures, discussion, and a few debates; and in the majority of classes the climate was very peaceful.

**Major Conclusions From Seventh-Grade Social Studies Textbooks**

The following conclusions were reached pertaining to peace from the analysis of 7th-grade social-studies textbooks. Peace is presented but not clearly defined. The presentation of peace themes is quite limited compared to war themes; biases and propaganda were noted in what was excluded or limited such as, the role of women, minorities, and the poor; the United Nations, nuclear issues and the root causes of war were lacking or limited; there was no connection explaining concepts and their relationship to peace; and hidden and overt messages were apparent that appeared to promote violence and war as an acceptable means of dealing with conflict; there were a few illustrations of the connection between issues of justice and critical thinking.

The conclusions drawn from the combined analysis of interviews with teachers and students, classroom observations, and textbooks are as follows. The following themes were not being taught in the twenty 7th-grade social-studies classes: the root causes of war and violence; the work of the United Nations; issues about nuclear war and nuclear weapons; the relationship between relevant concepts and peace. In addition, biases and propaganda were noted in the exclusion or deemphasis of women, minorities, and the poor; and very little is being taught about peace alternatives in history, with the exception of the civil rights period. Some peace-related themes are being taught, according to teachers, students, classroom observations, and textbooks. A good balance was found in the teaching of co-operation and competition; critical thinking, according to teachers and students, is being taught and was apparent during classroom observations; some values of peace were found being taught; individual responsibility was being taught according to the majority of teachers and students but was not found in textbooks; and hidden messages were apparent in textbooks; biases and prejudices were not found being taught in classroom practices, nor were any reported by students.

**Major Conclusions from Ten Peace Specialists**

The major conclusion from ten peace-education specialists' interviews was that: all ten specialists stressed that peace should be taught in public schools because education is vital in establishing peace in the world. The specialists also suggested that the earlier children learn peace education, the better it is, with the exception of certain topics like arms proliferation which a majority stated that children should not be exposed to at an early age. But as children mature, usually around 8th, 9th, and 10th grades, specialists suggested they should learn about these things.

The consensus among the specialists was that the truth about history, be it political, economic, or social, needs to be addressed, as well as the root causes of war. In the teaching of concepts such as nationalism, an international and global approach must be taken, as well as in other areas; a strong emphasis was placed on the teaching of critical and creative thinking by an emphasis on controversial issues including the teaching and practice of change to create a peaceful world. Several of the specialists indicated that adults need to be critical of themselves and that there needs to be an emphasis on teaching students to examine their own biases and prejudices in the process of learning peace.

All of the specialists strongly stressed that alternatives to violent solutions, conflicts, and war needed to be taught. And those most frequently suggested were conflict resolution, conflict management, mediation, and other problem-solving skills. All but two specialists stressed that the teaching of peace need to be incorporated inte all the subjects.

**Implementation of Peace Education in Public School Curricula**

I propose a Model Curriculum for Peace Education, with the content, methods, and structural changes needed to enable reformers to introduce this content by these methods.

The practical steps for implementing these changes in content, methods, and structure are: educating the educators, organizing citizens, appealing to city hall for support, involving students, using media, opening minds, and providing role models for peaceful behavior.

My proposal is to present subject material on peace education that would help combat the increasing violence in our schools and communities.

Furthermore, a peace-education curriculum would also present a more balanced approach in the presentation of issues of war and peace.

*The Materials*

*Conflict-Resolution Skills* of peace presented from the individual and social perspective that will teach students how to deal with and how to reduce the tensions and hostilities associated with conflict. Conflict resolution involves methods and skills of peace education that will increase security in the students, teachers, and school environment.

*Assertiveness Training Skills* that include self-esteem building, values clarification, intrapersonal and interpersonal communication skills, decision-making skills, goal-setting and self-knowledge. Most important, the students are taught how to channel their energy, particularly destructive and aggressive tendencies, toward more productive and constructive avenues that will lead them to happiness and success.

*Multicultural Education* emphasizing self-respect and respect for different cultures, religions, and races, which would help create an atmosphere of peace and harmony that would help reduce conflict.

*Environmental Issues* that teach appreciation and respect for the school, community, state, country, and planet earth, with its cultures, environment, interdependencies, conflicts, and continual change. Ecology teaches students to value their environment by practicing values of responsibility, caring, concern, and commitment.

In Social Studies, History, and American Government, many issues involving the concept of peace can be very useful. Some examples are the contributions of peace-making by the Native Americans; issues of justice and injustice, war and peace; emphasis on how wars and conflict could be resolved peacefully and how the United Nations has worked toward peace and how it can improve. In the study of the Eastern Hemisphere, the philosophies of different religions and cultures could be compared, and students could discuss the universal values that promote self preservation, right living, thinking, and acting with respect to others and to all living things. This approach would help students return to the basic human values

that appear to be lost in so many cases.

Peace education material, dealing with conflict-resolution skills, assertiveness-training skills, multicultural education, and environmental issues would be added to the following subjects:

Language Arts
Social Studies
Life Science
Behavioral Science
Reading/Written Language
Arts/Drama/Music

*Steps to Getting Peace Education into the Public Schools*

- Initiate research on peace education.
- Find out what the needs in each school are.
- Draft the peace-education curriculum and programs.
- Introduce peace education in the public schools by setting up meetings with administrators, teachers, students, parents, and school board members.
- Offer in-services, classes, and teachers training on peace education (in the process of teaching peace, teachers will be learning too).
- Get teachers' input, ask for their ideas and suggestions, and utilize their suggestions by incorporating their suggestions into the curriculum.
- Advertise the peace curriculum to the community to solicit outside support, for example from parents, community agencies, state representatives, members of Congress, local and state leaders, judges, and police chiefs.
- Organize mini-presentations or workshops for students so that teachers can observe the curriculum and the methods used to present it.
- Provide information about peace education via articles, community television, talk shows, radio - T.V., church groups, town meetings, and neighborhood watch groups.

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